



**Roy Porter**

## Obituary

ROY PORTER  
(1946–2002)

Roy Porter's sudden and completely unexpected death left many people in a state of shock. His presence was so powerful, and his energy so inexhaustible, that it seemed safe to assume that he was indestructible. For two decades, he embodied the spirit of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.

Roy was a Londoner by birth and inclination. He was born on the last day of 1946, in Bermondsey, south London, the only child of a jeweller. His childhood was movingly, if somewhat romantically, recalled in the introductory pages of what was probably his best book: *London: a social history* (1994). He valued the anonymity of what became in his lifetime a genuinely cosmopolitan city, and his subtle biography of the city was unusual among the dozens of books he wrote, in taking a long time to research and write.

Although Roy grew up in a household without many books, a teacher in his grammar school stimulated his love of ideas. He obtained a place at Christ's College, Cambridge, where his natural brilliance flourished. His starred double first in history (1968) won him a junior research fellowship at Christ's. Although a social historian by both training and instinct, he had discovered the history of science as an undergraduate, and his PhD thesis turned into his first book, *The making of geology: earth science in Britain, 1660–1815* (1977). He moved from Christ's College to Churchill College, Cambridge, in 1972, as a fellow and director of studies in history. He also gave lectures in the history faculty on the English Enlightenment, the skeleton of which was eventually expanded into one of his last books: *Enlightenment: Britain and the creation of the modern world* (2000). The eighteenth century always remained the period of his greatest love. A second volume of his mature assessment of the Enlightenment in Britain was almost completed at the time of his death, and will be published posthumously.

Despite Roy's outstanding success in Cambridge, he found the atmosphere narrow, and in 1979, he returned to London, to the Wellcome Institute. He and I had become close friends in Cambridge in the early 1970s, and by the time he joined us at the Wellcome, we were playing postal chess and were editing (with Janet Browne) *The dictionary of the history of science* (1981). I shall never forget the many mornings the three of us spent in my office, collectively editing every single entry in the volume.

Roy came to the Institute determined to bring his social historical perspective to the history of medicine. He brilliantly succeeded, developing two popular undergraduate courses, one on patients and doctors, which was patient orientated, and the other on the history of mental illness in Britain. He was a natural teacher, stimulating in his lectures and critical but supportive in his evaluation of his students. Like any good teacher, these themes were objects of his active research and provided material

for many of his books. He pioneered the historical study of the patient's perspective, beginning with essays that analysed the medical content of *Gentleman's Magazine* in the eighteenth century. An edited collection, *Patients and practitioners* (1985), and two volumes, written with his third wife, Dorothy Porter, followed this. His *Health for sale* (1989) continued the focus on his beloved eighteenth century, and, through his wonderfully evocative depiction of medical quackery, elaborated another theme dear to his heart, the notion of the medical marketplace.

The medical marketplace was also central to his work on the history of psychiatry. A three-volume collection, *The anatomy of madness* (1985–1987), which Roy and I edited with the late Michael Shepherd, originated in a successful seminar series held at the Wellcome Institute. Roy followed this with a steady stream of books on the history of psychiatry, the best of which was probably his *Mind forg'd manacles* (1987), an examination of mad-doctoring in England during the long eighteenth century. *A social history of madness* (1987) combined his interests in the history of psychiatry and the history of the patient in retelling the history of psychiatry through patients' eyes. He was the driving force in the writing of the massive collective history of Bethlem Hospital (1997). Roy's witty speech at the launch of this tome was a *tour de force*. He also edited important books in the field with Mark Micale and German Berrios, among others.

In addition to his own scholarship, Roy was a natural collaborator and editor. He and Mikuláš Teich co-edited for Cambridge University Press a series of volumes with comparative historical themes. He and George Rousseau also worked together over a number of years, beginning with *The ferment of knowledge* (1980), a collection of essays on the historiography of eighteenth-century science and medicine, and ending with their jointly written *Gout: the patrician malady* (1998). He and I began a Wellcome Institute series, successively published by Croom Helm, Routledge, and Rodopi. We had almost completed for Oxford University Press the *Oxford Dictionary of Scientific Quotations*, which will now have to be dedicated to his memory. Roy produced books with more than twenty other scholars. He also edited *History of Science* for twenty-nine years. In 1990, he and German Berrios became founding editors of a new periodical, *History of Psychiatry*, and he also co-edited from 1987 the *Journal of Historical Sociology*.

In his later years, Roy's work became increasingly populist in presentation. I include within this category his massive *The greatest benefit to mankind* (1997), accurately subtitled *a medical history of humanity from antiquity to the present*. Written with verve and wit, it was characteristically Porterian in its ambition and rapid production. He seemed to write faster than most people read, and the above books represent only a fraction of his output of books, articles and reviews. One colleague tells of sharing a train journey with Roy from London to York, during which time he believed they had been constantly talking. When Roy got off at York, however, he had also read and written the review of a book.

His ability to explain complex ideas simply and fluently made Roy a natural on radio and television, and he became without doubt the most famous medical historian of his generation. He seemed equally at ease chairing the arts programme *Nightwaves* for BBC Radio 3 and discussing the role of psychiatry in modern society. His

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communication skills also made him a popular external lecturer. He was always dashing off to catch a train or plane somewhere, and he treated each occasion seriously, whether it was a talk to a local history society or a prestigious eponymous lecture.

Roy was always an individualist. He liked jewellery and denims and always looked ill at ease when he had to put on a tie. At the same time, the establishment embraced him. He became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1994, and both the Royal College of Physicians of London and the Royal College of Psychiatrists elected him to honorary fellowship.

Roy never courted fame, it just came to him. Despite his vivacity, he was a very private person. He was wonderfully generous in giving advice and encouragement to the hundreds of people who sought his aid, but he was also disciplined in his use of time. He seemed to need little sleep and was generally at his desk long before most of his colleagues were awake. He always lived in the fast lane, but the bicycle remained his favourite mode of transportation. He was found dead beside it, cycling back from his allotment on 3 March 2002. He had had a heart attack.

Roy had taken early retirement in 2001, announcing that he wished to have more time for gardening, to learn some foreign languages and to take up the saxophone. He and his fifth wife, Natsu Hattori had bought a flat in St Leonards. His retirement was cruelly cut short, but he did appear happy to be relieved of the bureaucracy of modern academic life. He never slowed down, however, and he was working on half a dozen books when his Sunday morning trip to his allotment ended by the roadside.

**W F Bynum**